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ABSTRACT

For historical, cultural and sociological reasons, the American Indian's own perspective has been missing from the discussion on Indian education. Historically, White American government, education, literature, and entertainment have all played roles in the annihilation of Native communities and cultures. As children, Midwestern Indians born approximately between 1895 and 1920 were taken from their families and put into special federal schools. For them, and for many of their descendants, elements of White culture was seen as oppressive and untrustworthy. With fear, illiteracy, and poverty, American Indians rejected the dominate White society and its education institution. The idea of education was never foreign to Native Americans, however. Education enabled them to live very well in their own world. To Indians, education is a very personal means of promoting their societal and personal survival, not by greed, but by selflessness, generosity, and courage. White educational strategies have increasingly alienated Native Americans. New demographics suggest that public education might benefit if Native American and other cultures were better accommodated. Racist policies of assimilation must be replaced by education that comes to terms with Native Americans. Instead of changing the people to fit the system, it is time to change the system to fit the people. (TES)

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FOR THE ADMINISTRATOR:

Realities for the Native American and Education

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Abstract

Historically, Native Americans, like other cultural minorities, have either declined to participate in public education or. if they do, it is only for the first eight or ten grades and then they drop out of the educational system. This paper examines the lack of educational attainment and persistence among Native Americans from an historical/ cultural/sociological perspective.

FOR THE ADMINISTRATOR:

REALITIES FOR THE NATIVE AMERICAN AND EDUCATION

When we speak of minority education, specifically education for Native Americans[1], we are speaking of a void, a great grey area, of theories not tried or proven. We could review volumes on all types of education, teacher competency, testing, test results, tracking and so on. However, the researcher will soon discover that there is very little written about Indian education from the Indian perspective by cultural Indians.

Why is this so? For a more comprehensive answer to this and other problems associated with Indian education, it is necessary to look at this problem from the historical/ cultural/sociological perspective. This point of view may clarify and provide direction for administrators faced with the challenge of educating Native American youth.

THE MAKING OF AMERICA

With the coming of the European of the North American continent the culture and circumstances of the various Indian nations were changed forever. For the Indian nations, there was incessant warfare because of the relentless push of the European toward the West. Land and gold in the land were reason enough to began a federal policy of genocide in which whole nations of Native Americans were killed out. Following close behind was alcohol and diseases for which there were not even names much less any form of defense.

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[1] In this writing the words Native American, American Indian and Indian are used interchangeably.

Atkinson, Mortan and Derald (1983) report that on the arrival of the European on the shores of the North American continent, there were approximately three million Native Americans but this number has since been lowered to six hundred thousand. Statistically, the annihilation of this large a part of the population constitutes a greater instance of genocide than what Nazi Germany did to the Jews.

From approximately 1850 to 1900, there exists a great amount of written history on the Native American. During this time the culture and civilizations of the Native Americans were almost completely destroyed, and also out of this time came many of the stories, beliefs and myths which surround the Indian, in the mind of the non-Indian, to this day. In American literature, education and entertainment, the Indian is always the menace, the shadow lurking in the darkness (Brown, 1970).

By 1890, the military defeat of the various Indian nations was complete. Each nation was assigned a small parcel of land on which to live. By the turn of the century each nation had almost completely disintegrated. The Indian youth at this time were decimated by the three greatest problems associated with their forced removal from their homelands and destruction of their culture: disease, poverty and alcohol.

From the federal level down to the individual, white America's attitude toward Native Americans has been guided by little other than movies made in Hollywood. With their homelands taken away, the Indians were confined to a small parcel of land under the strict racist policy of the federal government. This

land was called a reservation from which the Indian could not leave. The penalty for freedom from the reservation was death.

White Americans refused to see the Indian as a human being until the trial of Standing Bear, a Ponca leader, in 1879 (Jackson, 1964). Even so, the Indian volunteered for the First World War by the thousands and because of their military service, were declared citizens of the United States in 1924.

Between 1860 and 1934, the United States government followed a deliberate and active attempt to destroy what remained of the Indian culture and finally assimilate them into the "main stream" of American society.

In Oklahoma, beside military defeat, the greatest blow to the Indian was the implementation of the Dawes Act of 1887. This enforced the partitioning of the small reservations into 160 acre parcels to be given to each individual Indian. This anticipated the end to the traditional culture because the Indian had no concept of private ownership of real estate. This only served to legalize the theft of what remained of the Indian lands.

EDUCATION AS CULTURAL GENOCIDE

Throughout this period of time, the white people were seen as an enemy, an oppressor, someone to be distrusted, hated and avoided. Anything of their culture was to be rejected, this included education.

It is unfortunate that the concept of formal education was presented in the fashion that it was. Agents of the Bureau of Indian Affairs came unannounced to the home of each Indian family and forcibly removed (kidnapped) all Indian children of school

age. They were taken to Chilocco Indian School, north of Newkirk, Oklahoma, Haskell Institute at Lawrence, Kansas, or to Carlisle Indian School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

The first people to come out of this setting are the grandparents and great-grandparents of Indian youth in junior high and senior high school today. These are the generations born between approximately 1895 and 1920, who began school not speaking English, were forced to be separated from their families for nine months out of the year, were forced into the extreme poverty of the reservations, were forced to learn to cope with racism, disease, alcohol, a shortened life span and all other ills which effect the very poor.

The following generation, roughly those born after 1935 to 1950 also began life learning to speak their native language and inheriting all the fears, anxieties, weaknesses, illiteracy, poverty and so forth which were experienced by their mothers and fathers. Especially harmful to their economic well-being was their aversion to formal education because of their basic misunderstanding of its function within the dominate society, as well as their rejection of the dominate society itself.

DEMOGRAPHICS

This brings us to the present generation of Indian youth with which the present administrator must contend. The present population pattern is such that Oklahoma has the largest population of Native Americans followed by California and Arizona. Occupying the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, the current generation is only slightly better off financially than

the preceding generation, but the understanding of the need for formal education is largely missing.

NEED OF RELEVANT EDUCATION

All societies from the beginning of time realized the need to provide some form of education for their youth. Plato, in his first book of the Republic, emphasized education and recommended that it include both body and mind (Kaplan, 1965). In his "Critique of Pure Reason," Kant maintains that it is of utmost importance to understand the nature of the knowledge we are learning. That is, what is its origin and what is its purpose (Weldon, 1958)? Kemp (1985) believes that the educator should be aware of a number of things about the learner, namely, characteristics, conditions, needs, objectives, styles and systems designs.

McNickle (1973) points out that the "education" of the Native American has been an ongoing process since the year 1609, and despite all efforts has thus far been pretty much of a failure. But, for untold generations, Native Americans have also provided their youth with an education. Though this was not an education in the same sense as the Western mind perceived it, it was an education in that it provided the Native American with the means whereby they could survive quite well in the world in which they lived.

For instance, the American Medical Association acknowledges that the Native American can heal where medical science cannot. The Native American used and had knowledge of medicines which pre-dated penicillin, used a birth control formula whose active

ingredient was a spermicide and learned to heal tuberculosis as well as rabies. Erodes (1972a) points out that the Sioux Medicine man and teacher, Lame Deer, emphasizes that learning must come from within, and that it is not something which is forced on one from without.

The Native American sees learning (education) as something which is highly personal. Things which are learned are learned because they are relevant and having meaning to the person learning them. Erodes (1972b) again points out that Indian youth are encouraged to learn things which are relevant to them, not by someone they have never seen before in a cold alien setting, but are encouraged to learn from their relatives and others who are emotionally and psychologically close to them. The knowledge which they are expected to learn has value in that its use and relevance is immediate and understood. It is not something that has no immediate value, no immediate use, not understood, and will only be used years in the future.

The educational system espoused by the Native American has been likened by Llewellyn and Hoebel (1973) to the ancient Roman Cursus Honorum. This is, the good in each individual was made evident, not by force of law, but by force of cultural tradition. Education was seen as a means of allowing and promoting societal and cultural survival, not by greed, materialism or personal gain, but rather that the individual is rewarded for a life which exemplifies honor, selflessness, courage, generosity and all other characteristics which society defines as good.

NEED FOR CHANGE

These concepts tie in or are directly applicable to educational principles espoused and expounded by Schubert (1986) who states that "curriculum should be defined as growth experiences that lead to a continuous reconceptualization of culture, individuals and groups" (p. 50). Are the White educational experiences of National Americans or their own cultural experiences more akin to this perspective? Could it be that the strategies used today in our schools increasingly alienate the Native American in stead of align them with public education?

Change is needed and Dobson, Dobson and Koetting (1985) further describe the ways in which education may move:

> Humankind is potentially good. Truth is an individual matter, learning occurs when the information encountered takes on personal meaning. Learning occurs by transaction and interaction. Representative language is: being, desires, process, democratic, freedom, feedback, fulfillment, experience, diversity, perception, potential, harmony, personal order, self-direction... (p. 37)

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is time that educators take a close and serious look at the state of education and the direction it is taking. By the year 2017, America will be predominantly non-white. Public education is facing a very serious problem in the coming change of demographics and it must assume a dynamic stance to accommodate the many different cultures which make up the American society.

Administrators must possess multi-cultural awareness if they are to relate effectively to the changing demographics. Education must come to terms with the Native American if the Native American is to accept education. Thus far, Indian students have been only victimized by a racist policy of assimilation (Reyhner & Eder, 1990) in virtually all areas of their lives. This includes not only religion (Loftin, 1989), but goes as far as government and economic development (Snipp, 1990). The American Indian is the poorest, most studied and least understood of minorities.

The Indian student is generally aware of these problems and inconsistencies. Their response has been the highest dropout rate, the highest alcohol/drug abuse rate, the highest suicide rate and lowest employment rate. But for all this, Red Horse, Johnson and Winer (1989) report that "very little is known or written about its extent or impact on Indian communities" (p. 267). It is safe to say that this statement can also be applied to Indian education.

The only way to counter this problem is to change education itself. White America has been trying to change the Native American into a white person since 1609; this effort has failed completely. It is time to stop trying to change the person to fit the system, it is time to change the system to fit the person. Current educational techniques offer various means whereby the administrator can afford to provide not only Native Americans, but all minorities a greater depth and latitude in obtaining an education.

SUMMARY

Research has shown that Native Americans have furiously resisted assimilation or being brought into the "main stream" of the American "melting pot." They have steadfastly maintained their separate cultural identity and in doing so share no heritage or historical ties, except for war, with white America. Indeed, the educational system teaches them that they are the enemy of the American way of life and that all good, just and honorable things come from the white man, his way of life and his religion. The educational system teaches that the Indian way of life, the Indian concept of what is good, honorable, just and godly are invalid, wrong and are in fact something to be ashamed of. Research cited in this article illustrate the inherent and profound error in this philosophy, which the American educational system espouses and perpetuates.

There are enough good people in administrative and government positions for the system to be changed positively. The only problem is the amount of time remaining to us.

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